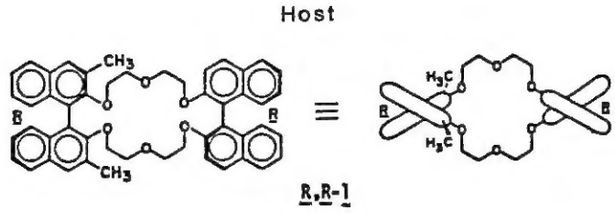
CHEAP TRUTH 12



Award-winning writer, critic, and CHEAP TRUTH shill Candace Berragus, who remembers the 1950's personally, turns the skeptical eye of experience upon her chosen target:

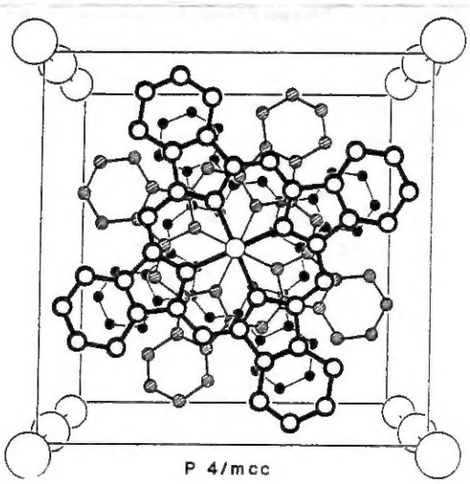
PUNK POSTURES

Now that NEUROMANCER has garnered so many accolades, maybe it's time to sit back and see just what heights have been climbed. The book has, yeah, style -- that gritty fascination with surfaces signalled by the opening line, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." Wonderful! TV as symbol for numbed reflexes, anomie, pollution, savage commercialism. And that slick style carries us forward on a garbage-reeking tide for... about a hundred pages.

Gibson, like Ballard, concentrates on surfaces as a way of getting at essences. All those brandnames, Braun coffee makers, quilted consoles, obsessive attention to what everyone wears, glistening green ice cities...

But then you become uncomfortably aware that Gibson doesn't actually know much about computers beyond brand names, and you are enmeshed in a standard pulp plot. The last third drags terribly, suspense hissing out like a puncture in a bald tire. (Indeed, all the guff about penetrating computer defenses depicted as a field of sensations -- this has become an instant freeze-dried cliche, a far cry from the actual experience and complexities of machine intelligence. Pretty, but not convincing.)

The tough characters never gain depth. The protagonist's inability to change, or even to shake his drug habit, creates a feeling of immobilized futility. The promised confrontation of the artificial intelligences occurs virtually offstage, and we get no sense of their alienness.



Is this the "punk SF" as Ellen Datlow keeps calling it? There are uncomfortable resemblances between the punk rock style of the '80's and the duckass ambience of the '50's, to be sure... a sense of postures struck for rebellion, but without any emotional foundation deeper than distaste. Other than adolescent rebellion, soon to be quenched by the ebbing of hormones, there seems little heft to all this.

There is little true anger in NEUROMANCER or in punk rock. The rest is posturing, and finally rings hollow. Even NEUROMANCER's last sentence, "He never saw Molly again," echoes the older tough-guy postures of Chandler, whose first novel, THE BIG SLEEP, concludes, "All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again." Uh-huh. Gimmie a sim-stim, Fred. And double on the ennui.

If SF is to give us new lands, it will have to try harder than this. NEUROMANCER has little thought in it -- surely the shabby old corporate-run future, with Japanese electro-dominance, can't be counted as a new idea? -- but much attention to the cosmetics of a time only slightly beyond our own.

So -- punk what? Actually, what do the purported punk SF writers have in common? Stylish Gibson, antic frazzled Sterling, the pure-hearted and liberal Robinson, hot-eyed Shirley -- all over 30, perhaps, but what else? I see no commonality of vision. Vague similarities -- bedazzled by technology, fond of street-savvy brutality, some preference for ravaged landscapes -- also link them with a horde of other SF writers.

But to become a movement demands some generational agreement, a narrative thrust... and something new. Only our habit of roping writers into eras makes us unite them. NEUROMANCER's dominance of this rather weak year for novels does not herald a revolution or a revelation.

Undeterred by allegations of critical overkill, CHEAP TRUTH hastens to laud:

THIS YEAR'S MODEL

BLOOD MUSIC by Greg Bear, Arbor House, 1985, $14.95.

It is sometimes claimed that the future of SF lies on its experimentalist fringes; in "magic realism," "postindustrial fiction," or in a metaphorical SF hybridizing with mainstream. With his latest novel, Greg Bear has dealt this theory a serious wound.

To date, Bear has seemed a rather conventional, establishment SF figure, cheerily paying his SFWA dues and writing for, horror, ANALOG. He is the only "cyberpunk" writer to show no trace of punk attitudes; if anything, he seems stuffily right-wing, suspicious of "Naderites" and inclined to give good ol' nukes the benefit of the doubt. You will search the Bear opus in vain for a chrome stud or coke-corroded razorblade. You are more likely to find stiff-necked Poul Andersonian lib-futurists struggling manfully amidst a sea of Luddite liberal ignorami.

Yet, in a triumph of the human spirit that truly makes one glow, Bear has shattered the limits of formula and is delivering truly superior fiction. BLOOD MUSIC in its award-winning short form was a fine, visionary piece; as a novel, it's staggering.

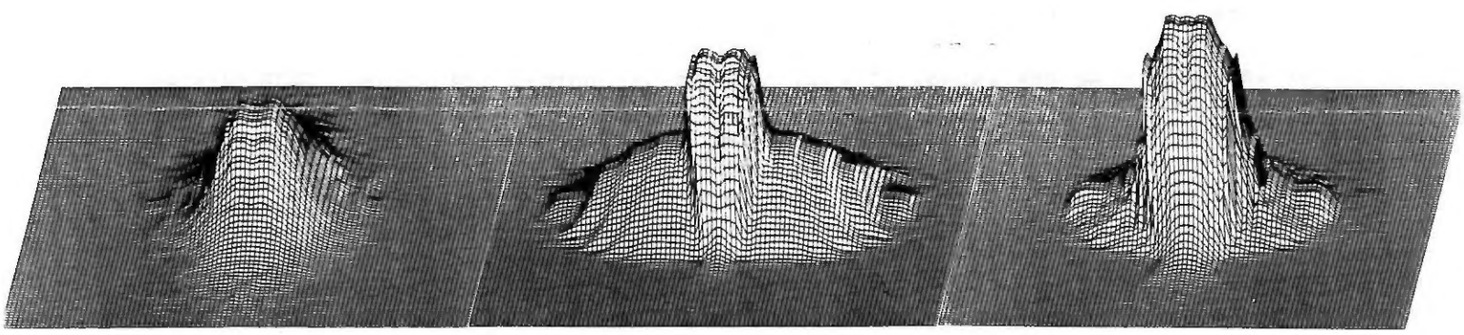
From the first chapter, one senses Bear's transition from journeyman to master. The coda elements are gone, replaced by a cool-eyed analysis of motive and character that builds with the graceful solidity of a Gothic arch. Bear's characters talk, act, and look like actual human beings. Especially praiseworthy is the deft way he captures their occasional realistic bursts of pettiness, craziness and stupidity. The book abounds with daring touches gracefully achieved, with nuts and bolts research brilliantly integrated into the narrative flow.

From this solid beginning, BLOOD MUSIC slowly accelerates into a pyrotechnic climax of pure visionary transcendance. New extrapolations emerge one after another, with steadily increasing speed and impact, until at last they are bursting into the narrative like runaway Mack trucks. The effect is explosively mind-boggling. There are loose ends, but it would be more accurate to describe them as whizzing chunks of shrapnel.

The prose ranges from the workmanlike to the numinous. There are occasional lapses into stream-of-consciousness, free verse, and obscurantist "alienspeak," a Bear mannerism that one regrets. But the lyrical description of a jet flight over the transformed remnants of Chicago is a classic evocation of mystery and wonder; its intensity renders it unforgettable. It is hard to imagine any writer doing it better.

Bear's career illustrates one of the central struggles of the genre: visionary anarchy versus literary discipline. As is common with writers of great imaginative gifts, Bear's early works are sometimes byzantine, piling ideas, plot twists, and erratic bursts of inspired prose into vast untidy heaps. Bear's success and his growing importance as a writer are due to his increasing integration of vision and literary skill. This has been achieved by sheer hard work, by a painstaking, serious-minded, long-term effort, the mark of a committed craftsman.

Bear's ambition and daring have paid off. He has transcended the limits of the hard SF tradition and written an exciting, accessible, modern novel. It's a fine book for SF neophytes, free of clannish inbred mustiness or gratuitous playing to the faan gallery. It is elegant in the best sense, without excess moving parts, expositive lumps, and preachy apologias. BLOOD MUSIC is one of the first definitive novels of the 1980's.



CHEAP TRUTH 809-C West 12th Street Austin, Texas 78701 USA. NOT COPYRIGHTED. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, graphics. "Smugglers in the Marketplace of Ideas"